

**Open Report on behalf of Richard Wills - Executive Director-
CommunitiesCommunities**

Report to:	Mid Lincolnshire and South Lincolnshire and Rutland Local Access Forums
Date:	6 July 2011/ 19 July 2011
Subject:	The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature

Summary:
The Government has released further details of the Natural Environment White Paper. The White Paper outlines the Government's vision for the natural environment over the next 50 years, backed up with practical action to deliver that ambition.

Recommendation(s):
i) That the forum notes the contents of the report.

1. Background

The plans are contained in the 'Natural Choice', the first white paper on the natural environment in 20 years, and are directly linked to the research carried out for the national ecosystem assessment which showed the strong economic arguments for safeguarding and enhancing the natural environment. It also acts on recommendations of 'Making Space for Nature' a report into the state of England's wildlife sites, led by Professor John Lawton.

The broad theme of the White Paper is to protect and improve the natural environment by working to improve the quality of the natural environment and halt the decline in habitats and species, degradation of landscapes and erosion of natural capital. The Government aim to achieve this through more joined – up action at local and national level to create an ecological network which is resilient to changes and external pressures.

Discussion

Reconnecting People to Nature

Chapter 4 of the document contains a section describing the ways in which the Government aim to 'Reconnect people and nature'.

The key reforms for reconnecting people and nature are:

- **improving public health locally**, by making high-quality green space available to everyone;
- **action to get more children learning outdoors**, removing barriers and increasing schools' abilities to teach outdoors;
- **new Green Areas Designation**, empowering communities to protect local environments that are important to them; and
- **help for everyone to 'do the right thing'**, at home, when shopping or as volunteers.

Connecting through nature's health service

There is a wealth of evidence on the positive effect that spending time in the natural environment has on health and emotional wellbeing. A good-quality environment is linked to a variety of health benefits including a reduction in problems associated with high blood pressure, in addition to better mental health and reduced stress. Research also indicates that if every household in England were provided with good access to quality green space, an estimated £2.1 billion in healthcare costs could be saved. Conversely, a poor local natural environment can damage people's health and contribute to health inequalities.

From April 2013, Directors of Public Health will be employed within upper tier and unitary local authorities. They will be in a position to influence local services, for example joining up activity on rights of way, countryside access and green space management to improve public health by connecting people with nature. Forthcoming guidance will make clear that the wider determinants of health, including the natural environment, will be a crucial consideration in developing joint strategic needs assessments and joint health and wellbeing strategies.

In July the Government will launch a new Change4Life summer campaign through newspapers, supermarkets and schools and on TV. This is designed to encourage children and their families to get more active and eat more healthily over the summer holidays. Outdoor activities will be a big part of this, with ideas and tips for activities.

Connecting by improving access to the countryside

The Government has outlined that clear, well-maintained paths and bridleways are important to give people access to the natural environment and can be enjoyed by cyclists, walkers and horse riders. They also believe that there is considerable scope to improve and extend this network, for example through Local Access Forums and Rights of Way Improvement Plans. It is intended to make it easier for local communities and civil society groups to get involved in developing and maintaining networks of paths and accessible green space.

The Government propose to consult on simplifying and streamlining the processes for recording and making changes to public rights of way, based on proposals made by Natural England's working group on unrecorded rights of way. This will make it easier to claim public rights of way and to make changes to them in order to create a network that meets the needs of local people. As part of the Government's wider barrier-busting initiative, they will also work with stakeholders to tackle any barriers to local involvement caused by regulations or a lack of information.

People make more than 57 million visits to our National Parks each year and, together with the 34 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and 224 National Nature Reserves. The Government want to see a shift away from people using cars to get to these beauty spots, with more people choosing public transport, cycling or walking. Not only do these transport methods have a lower environmental impact, but there is evidence that cyclists and walkers spend more in the local economy than visitors by car, benefiting local communities.

The Government's £560 million Local Sustainable Transport Fund will help local transport authorities do more to encourage walking and cycling, improve public transport and make better connections between different forms of sustainable transport.

Connecting through better access to environmental information

From summer 2011 Directgov will provide information on actions people can take to help the natural environment such as purchasing choices, opportunities for volunteering and making the most of green spaces.

Web-based government information on the natural environment will be brought together and made available through a single 'My Environment' web portal, including facilities to search by post code for environmental features such as local nature reserves.

3. Consultation

a) Scrutiny Comments

n/a

b) Executive Councillor Comments

n/a

c) Local Member Comments

n/a

d) Policy Proofing Actions Required

n/a

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